

Introduction

“It loves me. It loves me not.” This is the mantra I sometimes find myself reciting when I encounter the Bible, or people informed by its claims. Which phrase I utter depends on whether the text or its interpretations uplift, offend, or oppress me. Despite the subordinating rhetoric and violent imagery pervading the biblical text, or the negative experiences I encounter that result from an individual’s or group’s warped use of it, I cannot refrain from returning to its pages again and again—with a devout sentiment, no less. Some would say that it is a form of insanity—my continual engagement with the biblical texts, while expecting different results each time. However, my expectation is based not on the notion that the abrasive and ruthless passages of the Bible would magically be rewritten before our next encounter, but rather on the prospect of new tools and ways of reading that can help to deal with these types of texts so that they do not cause further harm.

Womanist biblical scholar Renita J. Weems notes the paradoxical relationship between the Bible and African American women that I have just described.¹ She highlights the fact that, despite the Bible’s

1. *Womanist* is a term used by some women of color to reflect the unified aspects of their identity and experience in terms of race, sex, and class (to say the least). Certainly, the term *womanist* involves so much more—such as the power of naming oneself and the resistance to that which

use as a tool of oppression, it remains very influential in African American religious life.² As such, she rightly asserts that African American women must learn to read the Bible with caution and resistance, being careful not to internalize those things that offend them or threaten their dignity.³ But what happens when the text reflects back to you aspects of your identity with which you either have not come to terms or refuse to embrace? How do you confront a text that forces you to recognize and admit certain realities—such as your privilege and participation in the capitalist structures of the United States—without limiting your ability to protest your simultaneous victimization within the same context? How do you deal with a text that frustrates your ability to efface inequalities, not only between yourself and others of your own racial/ethnic background and minority status, but also between yourself and your white (female) counterparts? How can you read the Bible “with caution and resistance” when what you read implicates you in the very things that may “offend” or “threaten the dignity” of others? These are the questions that emerge as I encounter the woman Babylon in the book of Revelation. A careful and comprehensive examination of this text reads like a mirror that reflects an image of myself that almost evokes the articulation of a new mantra: “I love me. I love me not.” Well, almost.

“She is no ordinary woman.” This was my thought after a careful engagement with her text. Many would suggest, and rightly so, that Babylon in Revelation is a metaphor. However, *she* is also a

attempts to undermine one’s dignity—but one will have to turn to chapter 1 for such an in-depth discussion.

2. Renita J. Weems, “Reading *Her Way* through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 57.

3. *Ibid.*, 63.

female literary character in a narrative, and therefore some form of imaginative readerly engagement is warranted. Thus, you should know that my book is more than a theoretical comparison of interpretations of Revelation. It is scholarship, yet also heavily infused with emotion, which, at times, is quite raw. You have been warned.

Although I have attempted to be the author's implied reader—the hypothetical hearer to which John's work is addressed—I cannot help but also read John's text resistantly. As a woman, and as an African American, his depiction of the woman Babylon incites many emotions within me, ranging from sadness and rage to joy and relief. Because I see so much of myself in her, she has become real to me. Therefore, whereas John intends to destroy the woman Babylon in order to depict the overtaking of the Roman Empire by God's empire, my appropriation of this female figure will empower and elevate her—an aim that runs counter to his. The words that John uses to paint a negative portrait of the woman Babylon are the very ones that I use to highlight her beautiful complexity. Some may say this is an effort to save myself. Perhaps it is, but I will address that later. For now, let me explain why the woman Babylon is no ordinary woman.

In the book of Revelation, the woman Babylon symbolizes imperial authority on the one hand, represented by her royal garb (17:4) and unspoken words (18:7),⁴ and abject servitude on the other hand, represented by the term *pornē* applied to her via the inscription on her forehead, “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations” (17:5 NRSV), which, as will be argued below, suggests a punitive tattoo. This mark of ownership, and a more accurate understanding of the label *pornē*, suggest that the woman Babylon is not just a prostitute, as will also be argued below, but is also a

4. “As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, ‘I rule as a queen/empress [*basilissa*]; I am no widow, and I will never see grief . . .’ (18:7), translation modified.

slave.⁵ Representing both subjection (a slave woman) and prestige (an empress/imperial city), the woman Babylon is positioned on both sides of the colonial divide. Employing a postcolonial womanist critique,⁶ I will argue that the woman Babylon is an object of ambivalent identification, which incites tension within this African American woman (and, potentially, other African American women as well) because she reflects ever so sharply and biting my continual conflicting reality of being simultaneously a victim of, and participant in, empire.⁷ This is a truth for which I was not emotionally prepared.

My social location as a privileged African American woman urges me to adopt a particular stance in what is known as the “Great Whore” debate of Revelation 17. It refers to the scholarly discussion of the understanding of the woman Babylon as either a “whore” or a “city” and the implications of such classification. For the purposes of this book, I focus specifically on the work of Tina Pippin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as their work most clearly explicates both sides of the debate. Pippin employs a gender-critical approach to Revelation to critique the use and implications of gendered metaphors, which she asserts are not accidental, but reflect an inescapable androcentric, even misogynistic, perspective. She criticizes how feminist commentaries move beyond the troubling aspects of the annihilation of the woman Babylon (17:16); that is, most commonly by emphasizing that the woman refers to a city.

5. Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen D. Moore argue that the widespread perception of the term *pornē* in the latter half of the first century c.e. suggests that it should be understood as “brothel slave,” although scholars have tended to treat her as a *hetæra* [courtesan]” (“How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore?’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 [2011]: 551–52, 557).

6. The term *postcolonial* with regard to biblical analysis refers to the critical study of empire, its effects on the parties involved, and any form of resistance to it. This explanation is a gross oversimplification; however, a more thorough discussion of this term is found in chapter one.

7. I seek to offer an African American woman’s interpretation of the woman Babylon; however, it must be stated that I do not and cannot speak for all African American women.

Pippin points out that these interpretations are problematic because they obscure the “relationship between the fantastic world of the *Apocalypse* and reality.”⁸ Although “metaphoric violence against women is not the same as real violence,” metaphor can still be dangerous and “harmful to real women because it shapes perceptions of reality and of gender relations for men and for women.”⁹ Thus, as Pippin notes, in Revelation the traditional hierarchical views of male over female—the object of the common feminist critique of hegemonic Christianity—remain untouched and undisturbed, such that both the women of the text and women of today remain subordinated and excluded from the realm of power.¹⁰

Schüssler Fiorenza agrees that this gender-critical reading is “crucially important to uncover and demystify the gender code of Revelation”; however, she asserts that it is also “in danger of revalorizing the symbolic sex-gender system of the text while seeking to deconstruct it.”¹¹ For Schüssler Fiorenza, this reification of the text’s rhetoric lessens, if not destroys, the possibility for women to reread the text, resist its interlocking structures of domination, or produce liberating messages from the text.¹² She posits, therefore, that

8. Tina Pippin, “The Heroine and the Whore: The Apocalypse of John in Feminist Perspective,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 143.

9. J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 120n55.

10. Pippin, “The Heroine and the Whore,” 143–44.

11. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 147. Schüssler Fiorenza’s assertion is part of a long-standing debate between her and Pippin. Schüssler Fiorenza has long argued against “essentializing” individual images in Revelation, and instead suggests that they be viewed and analyzed “in relation to other images and within the ‘strategic’ positions [i.e. rhetoric] of the composition” (*The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985], 188).

12. *Kyriarchy* is the term Schüssler Fiorenza coined to express the interlocking and overlapping systems of oppression that extend beyond the binary gender dualism of men versus women. It “seeks to express the intersecting structures of dominations and to replace the commonly used term, *patriarchy*, which is often understood in terms of binary gender dualism. As an analytic category . . . [it] does not restrict itself to gender analysis but seeks to comprehend the complex multiplicative interstructuring of gender, race, class, age, national, and colonial dominations

a feminist rhetorical-political analysis enables one to read John's use of rhetoric and gendered imagery not simply in gender terms, but in political terms as well.¹³ Interpreting the text within this framework can help one to "discover a critique of empire in the conventionally coded feminine language for a city, which uses gender for constructing power," and, therefore, to negate any interpretations that suggest that "the vision of Babylon 'the Great' tells us anything about Revelation's understanding of actual women."¹⁴

The underlying question of the "Great Whore" debate is not whether metaphors matter and affect real women; each of these scholars would say that they do. Rather, the issue is *how to respond and read* for real women in one's analysis, both historically and theologically, and through which metaphors—woman or city. It is because of the work of these scholars, to whom I am indebted, that I have a foundation on which to build.

My reading of the woman Babylon provides an intervention in the "Great Whore" debate as it not only deconstructs the either/or dichotomy, but also, and more importantly, is the first to bring the categories of race, ethnicity, and class to bear on it. My sociocultural context impels me to be sensitive to such categories and, therefore, leads me to hold the two elements, woman and city, in tension, rather than deciding on one rather than the other. A postcolonial womanist interpretation of the woman Babylon highlights the simultaneous duality of her characterization—her depiction as both a brothel slavewoman *and* as an empress/imperial city.

In addition, my reading of the woman Babylon seeks to expand and complicate African American interpretations of Revelation, all of which ultimately and generally regard the text as essentially

and their imbrication with each other" (Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word*, 14, emphasis original).

13. *Ibid.*, 131–32.

14. *Ibid.*, 136, 135, respectively.

liberating. Both Brian K. Blount and Clarice J. Martin, for example, posit John as a marginalized author who provides a critique—both social and religious—of the Roman Empire.¹⁵ Blount, analyzing the entire book of Revelation through the lens of the African American experience, sees correlations between the situation of John’s implicit reading community and that of the African American slaves and of the Black Church today. His main thesis is that the text of Revelation is a story of struggle and suffering, as well as active resistance, in the context of oppression—a story all too familiar to African American churches.

Martin focuses on the phrase *kai sōmatōn, kai psychas anthrōpōn* (usually translated as “slaves and human lives” or “slaves and human souls”) in the cargo list of Rev. 18:13 and how it serves as a mirror into African American history.¹⁶ As a womanist, she privileges black women’s experience in her analysis and discerns how the text highlights and reflects the “historical experiences of subjectivity” of black women.¹⁷ Her analysis reflects on the situation of African American slavery in order to highlight new ways to understand the rhetorical and ideological functions of the verse in its original context. Similar to Blount, Martin places John (and his community) and womanist thinkers in solidarity; they both “refract struggle, . . . untrammelled resistance and fearless resolve in pursuit of the liberated life.”¹⁸

15. See Blount, *Can I Get a Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), and Martin, “Polishing the Unclouded Mirror: A Womanist Reading of Revelation 18:13,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 82–109.

16. Although *kai sōmatōn, kai psychas anthrōpōn* is literally translated as “bodies and souls of people,” Martin rightly asserts that the words *sōmatōn* and *psychas anthrōpōn* “function as synonyms for ‘slave’” (“Polishing the Unclouded Mirror,” 89).

17. *Ibid.*, 105.

18. *Ibid.*, 106.

As an African American whose ancestors were victims of the American slave system—my great-great-grandmother was a former slave (Indiana Grant, 1851–1956)—I appreciate and applaud the works of these scholars that express the resistance to, and subversion of, imperial powers by colonized peoples. John as a voice of and for the oppressed is noteworthy. Nevertheless, another perspective is warranted, especially when the magnifying glass of postcolonial and womanist inquiry is positioned over the writings of John.

I move beyond the general African American notion that John is on the side of the marginalized people. Although his reinscription of imperial ideologies does not imply that he cannot be a minority, the way in which he depicts, discards, and destroys the *woman* Babylon causes me to question any meaningful form of resistance to empire in this text at all. For me as an African American woman, resistance to empire is null and void if it does not include the liberation of women. Martin makes a similar argument in an article on the *Haustafeln* (household codes), in which she calls the Black Church to practice consistent hermeneutics.¹⁹ She powerfully asserts that “the African American interpretative tradition [is] marked by a forceful critique and rejection of a literalist interpretation of the slave regulations in the *Haustafeln*, but [is] not marked by an equally passionate critique and rejection of a literalist interpretation regarding the subordination of women to men in the *Haustafeln*.”²⁰ This is problematic. Therefore, she insists that “African American believing communities need to assume a new and more profoundly integrative praxis that moves women ‘from the margins’ . . . ‘to the center.’”²¹ This is what I intend to do with the woman Babylon of Revelation. By focusing the

19. Clarice J. Martin, “The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: ‘Free Slaves’ and ‘Subordinate Women,’” in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*, 206–31.

20. *Ibid.*, 225.

21. *Ibid.*, 228.

gaze on her and her narrative, I will draw attention to John's own imperialistic and patriarchal ideology, thereby challenging the general African American notion that John stands fully over and against empire. Instead of a minority report, I argue that John presents a *masculinist* minority report. A minority report at the expense of a woman is not inclusive of women at all.

Building upon traditional historical-critical scholarship on Revelation, my thesis will be argued through an interdisciplinary effort consisting of two newer approaches: womanist criticism—specifically, Martin's liberationist womanist approach—and postcolonial criticism, which draws on extrabiblical postcolonial theory. This combined interpretive effort will fill a void in Revelation scholarship. To the best of my knowledge, these two approaches have only been employed individually in Revelation scholarship and never in tandem.

Postcolonial analysis complements a womanist biblical analysis by offering analytic terminology to describe and account for the colossal realities of colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonial biblical criticism—the critical analysis of empire, imperialism, colonialism, and other related phenomena as they pertain to the biblical texts and their reception history—has largely developed from and within liberation theology.²² Postcolonial biblical criticism analyzes biblical

22. This development is especially evident from two further studies of Revelation: Vitor Westhelle, "Revelation 13: Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial, a Reading from Brazil," in Rhoads, *From Every People and Nation*, 183–99; and Jean-Pierre Ruiz, "Taking a Stand on the Sand of the Seashore: A Postcolonial Exploration of Revelation 13," in *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 119–35. The number of works that engage postcolonial theory or criticism (beyond biblical studies) in their analyses of Revelation's relationship to empire is rather scarce. For example, Jean K. Kim's 1999 article, "'Uncovering her Wickedness': An Inter(con)textual Reading of Revelation 17 from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective," is informed by postcolonial studies (*Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 [1999]: 83–112). Steven J. Friesen (*Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001]) and Christopher A. Frilingos (*Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004]) employ the postcolonial

texts in their original relation to empire, and in their relation to empire from the fourth century to the present.²³ It focuses not only on how biblical texts were being legitimized as part of colonial and imperial enterprises, but also how they have been used to resist and interrogate such enterprises. Such resistance can be fraught with complexity. Moore, for example, employing the postcolonial theory of Homi Bhabha, illustrates how Revelation simultaneously resists and mimics essential aspects of Roman imperial ideology.²⁴ Postcolonial analysis, therefore, helps to highlight the blurred borders of Rome and John's imperial agendas.

A womanist analysis of Revelation can refocus a postcolonial critique of Revelation in powerful ways, especially when one seeks to determine the implications of such a text for African American women today—one of the goals of this book. The womanist principles that serve as a foundation for Martin's liberationist approach prove helpful for my project. In conjunction with other womanist biblical scholars and theologians,²⁵ she foregrounds the experiences of African American women, centers on issues of race, gender, and class, and places the interpreter in solidarity with the

theory of Edward Said in their work. Additionally, Catherine Keller performs a feminist and postcolonial analysis of Revelation and contemporary US imperialism in her *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

23. This is more than just an intensification of a task that was always already part of the historical-critical project. Biblical scholars have analyzed the biblical text's relations to the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Seleucid, and Roman empires. There is an interestedness in postcolonial biblical criticism that surpasses a false sense of neutrality.
24. Stephen D Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament*, Bible in the Modern World 12 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 97–121.
25. See, for example, Raquel A. St. Clair, *Call and Consequences: A Womanist Reading of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "I am Black and Beautiful, O Ye Daughters of Jerusalem . . .": African American Virtue Ethics and a Womanist Hermeneutics of Redemption," in *African American Religious Life and the Story of Nimrod*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn and Allen Dwight Callahan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 35–51; Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

oppressed. Taken together, the interpretive sensibilities of both postcolonial and womanist inquiry help to compose a postcolonial womanist hermeneutics with which to engage Revelation: what I call a hermeneutics of *ambivalence*.

A hermeneutics of *ambivalence* begins with the experiences of African American women and, therefore, analyzes concepts of gender, race, and class (three interlocking systems of oppression), but also political elements of language and empire. It combines African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the "veil," as outlined in *The Souls of Black Folk*,²⁶ with postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's analytic category of colonial ambivalence, as posited in *The Location of Culture*.²⁷ The "veil" is suggestive of a metaphorical covering that prohibits and hinders African Americans—women, in this case—from seeing themselves as they truly are. Instead, they perceive themselves through the eyes of white America or black men, causing them to either deny or ignore their racial heritage or gender. Du Bois's assertion that this veil is forcibly positioned is evidenced today, as there are instances when African American women must comport themselves to a certain preconceived and established Euro-American or black male standard. Added to this, however, is the fact that there are times when the veil may be personally positioned as a means of protection—a critical interpretive strategy similar to the use of cryptic messages in slave songs—or to perpetuate one's supposed ignorance of the suffering of others to maintain one's seat at the imperial table. Both uses of the veil, involuntary or voluntary, occur in the academy and the church.

The "ambivalence" part of the hermeneutics reflects the tension—the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from a

26. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Library of America, 1986; originally published 1903).

27. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

particular object or person—that exists within a single individual, not least in the colonial or postcolonial arena. In this book, such tension is generated by the ambivalent characterization of the woman Babylon, whose veil—the line that separates both aspects of her identity—is made evident in her dual representation as both colonizer and colonized. This veil reflects back to me the particularized veil in my own life. Weems captures this ambivalence in her captivating reflection on the paradox of being a minority in a capitalistic society, but also being privileged when in the company of other minorities—even those of the same race. As an educated and professionally employed African American woman, Weems is “painfully aware” of her difference when she notices the black janitress who cleans the floor that Weems traverses on the way to an executive meeting.²⁸ The paradox in my reading of the *simultaneously* brothel slavewoman *and* empress/imperial city is that it becomes an experience of looking in an “unclouded” mirror.²⁹ I come face to face with the veil in my own identity. The line has been drawn. Although I do not benefit from the consumption of blood as the woman Babylon, in her empress persona, does from her victims (17:6), I must be forever aware that I benefit from the blood, sweat, and tears that were shed and continue to be shed by the many women and men, so many of them African American, who work at menial tasks to make my (imperial) life comfortable. With a hermeneutics of *ambivalence*, the marks of empire that signify both my victimization by, and my participation in, empire are unveiled before me. And the mantra begins again: “I love her. I love her not.”

Chapter 1 establishes the postcolonial womanist hermeneutics that I employ to analyze the woman Babylon in Revelation. I begin with

28. Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Innisfree, Inc., 1988), 11.

29. Martin, “Polishing the Unclouded Mirror,” 83.

an overview of womanist theology and its relationship to biblical hermeneutics, as the former is the foundation of my interpretive lens. A discussion of the origins of womanist thought, and an examination of its appropriation by African American female scholars in various fields such as theology, ethics, and biblical studies, will help determine the criteria that are needed for the development of a womanist approach to Revelation. Next, I discuss the second component of my approach, postcolonial theory. An overview of postcolonial studies and its relevance for biblical studies will illustrate how the tools and analytic categories of extrabiblical postcolonial theory help to more accurately analyze phenomena such as colonialism and imperialism. The last section of this first chapter is intended to have a cumulative effect. I explain the need for an interdisciplinary venture between womanist hermeneutics and postcolonial studies by briefly explicating the lack of a central focus on the experiences of black women in the two disciplines of African American studies and postcolonial studies. I also discuss the benefits of the interpretive venture between womanist hermeneutics and postcolonial studies by illustrating how they complement each other. Finally, I bring everything together from the chapter by outlining the womanist tenets and postcolonial premises that I employ to formulate my postcolonial womanist hermeneutics of *ambivalence*.

In chapter 2, I introduce two scholarly conversations that my work engages because they focus on issues that affect some aspect of my identity as an African American woman. First, I present a survey of the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Tina Pippin with regard to the figure Babylon in Revelation—a scholarly conversation known as the “Great Whore” debate. As a *woman*, I am interested in their focus on issues such as the text’s use of gendered language, imperial rhetoric, and their implications for women today. More specifically, however, I am concerned with how they interpret Babylon—as a

woman or as a city—and the implications of such readings. As a *black* woman, however, I am also interested and culturally invested in what is posited in African American scholarship about Revelation; namely, the overall interpretive message that John writes a minority report representing his solidarity with marginalized peoples against oppression. My self-identification as a simultaneously privileged and oppressed black woman causes me to read Revelation a bit differently. By providing a little history of these conversations, it will help illustrate not only *how* my work builds upon the scholarship presented, but also *why* my work is such an important undertaking.

Chapter 3 discusses Revelation in its historical, religious, and cultural contexts. Specifically, I state my working assumptions regarding authorship and dating, and discuss in some detail the social setting of Revelation that has led to various arguments for the occasion of its writing, in order to establish the historical context that informs my interpretation. I understand Revelation to be written by a Christian³⁰ prophet named John, although not the apostle, during the latter years of Emperor Domitian's reign (81–96 C.E.), when the persecution of Christians in the Roman province of Asia was local and sporadic.

Chapter 4 is a postcolonial womanist analysis of the woman Babylon, in which I apply my hermeneutics of *ambivalence*. I will discuss sealing and marking as they are understood in the context of Revelation. I will also examine the practices of tattooing and branding in the Roman world as set forth by classicist C. P. Jones, in order to make sense of the inscription on the forehead of the woman

30. In the ancient context of Revelation, there were no “Christians” per se, only Jews, some of whom were followers of Jesus Messiah. The term *Christian* is not even found in the text. There is no “Christianity” in this period, at least not in the sense of an independent religion separate and distinct from Judaism. It emerged within Judaism, is intimately bound up with it, and is still a fledgling development in this period. The use of the word *Christian* in this book is strictly for the purpose of convenience.

Babylon as a slave tattoo and to connect her with African American history and experience.³¹ Next, I will analyze the woman Babylon as an at once brothel slavewoman and empress/imperial city, noting her ambivalent characterization. I will then interpret the text with a hermeneutics of *ambivalence*, while foregrounding the experiences of African American women.

My analysis extends and complicates the Revelation scholarship of both African Americans and feminists. First, by adding postcolonial analysis to a reading that privileges African American female culture and experience, I am able to illustrate that what John presents, through his reinscription of empire and its imperial and patriarchal ideologies that subjugate women, is a *masculinist* minority report, contrary to the minority report suggested by African American biblical scholars. Second, my reading helps to identify and emphasize the ambivalent characterization of the woman Babylon; she reflects both sides of the colonial divide. This argument, grounded in my particular sociocultural context, disrupts the either/or (woman or city) dichotomy of the “Great Whore” debate by incorporating an analysis of the categories of race, ethnicity, and class.

The implication of my reading of the woman Babylon’s text with a hermeneutics of *ambivalence*, however, is not just for me and other African American women. As I will discuss in the conclusion, my approach is not bound to any particular gender, race, or class distinction. Its application is also not confined solely to the text of Revelation. When we—as readers of biblical texts—employ a hermeneutics of *ambivalence* in the task of biblical interpretation we may be confronted with an image that is intimately familiar. The veil that highlights the opposing characteristics of our identity may be revealed in the reflection of the text, and we may begin to sense the

31. Jones, “Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 139–55.

tension it elicits. Do not run from it; rather, embrace the revelation. Certainly, this veil can be rent, and we can behold a fuller awareness of our beautiful complexity, if we are willing to admit and embrace the seemingly conflicting aspects of our identity. “I love me. I love me not.”